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SUBJECT: SAUDI SUCCESSION: NAYIF RISING

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Classified By: Ambassador James B. Smith,
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SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Saudi Prince Nayif has taken full advantage of the opportunity provided by his March 2009 appointment as Second Deputy Prime Minister to establish himself as the de facto Crown Prince-in-waiting and heir apparent to the Saudi throne. Some observers see Nayif's October trip to Egypt, where he was received with honors usually accorded a Crown Prince, as confirmation that he has secured his rights to the position. Nayif is widely seen as a hard-line conservative who at best is lukewarm to King Abdullah's reform initiatives. However, it would be more accurate to describe him as a conservative pragmatist convinced that security and stability are imperative to preserve Al Saud rule and ensure prosperity for Saudi citizens. Necessarily loyal to the King (though not always to his ideas), Nayif is a skilled practitioner of the art of balancing the competing religious and reformist factions in Saudi society. He harbors anti-Shia biases and his worldview is colored by deep suspicion of Iran, despite his active role in developing Saudi-Iranian relations. His foreign policy instincts are guided by his belief that security cooperation should not be affected by politics. A firm authoritarian at heart, he is skeptical of initiatives to expand political participation or women's rights. Ironically, however, some of his security-driven initiatives, such as ID cards for women, have resulted in progress. Nayif promotes a vision for Saudi society under the slogan of "intellectual security," which he advocates as needed to "purge aberrant ideas." This is a key difference with King Abdullah, whose strategy to reduce extremism includes an emphasis on dialogue, tolerance of differences, and knowledge-based education that is objectionable to many conservatives. The Saudi royal family's adherence to tradition as the only sure way to avoid instability is probably Nayif's strongest advantage in his bid to become the next crown prince, though the decision will likely not be made until circumstances dictate. End summary.

SEIZING HIS OPPORTUNITY...

[1](#)2. (C) Saudi Crown Prince Sultan's lengthy absence and the probability that he will never resume an active role in government created an opportunity for Prince Nayif to expand his influence even before his appointment as Second Deputy Prime Minister in March 2009. In addition, Riyadh Governor Prince Salman, possibly the next most powerful prince, has

also been away from the Kingdom as he has stayed at the Crown Prince's side through the latter's long convalescence. But Nayif's new position enlarges his opportunity further by giving him more reason to be seen in the King's company, and the chance to be seen governing - chairing cabinet meetings - when the King travels abroad. His new post also gives him a platform for public comment on a wider range of issues, since his portfolio is no longer limited to security matters. Some observers believe that Nayif's visit to Egypt in early October, where he was received with honors usually accorded to a Crown Prince, as confirmation that he has secured his rights to the position.

...FROM A POSITION OF STRENGTH

¶3. (C) As Minister of Interior since 1975, Nayif has a strong institutional power base that touches nearly every Saudi citizen's life, whether they know it or not. (NOTE: The Ministry of Interior is one of the largest Saudi government agencies -- paramilitary forces alone number about 130,000 men -- and includes the internal security intelligence service (the Mubahith), all local and national police, the Special Security Forces, the Special Emergency Forces, Customs and Immigration, the Coast Guard, and the Border Guard. End note.) Under his leadership, security forces successfully defeated an Al Qaeda-led insurgency. To do so, the MOI had to become much more professional and efficient, with the result that Nayif now commands an internal security apparatus that is battle-tested and far more capable of exerting political and social control throughout the country. MOI's proficiency contrasts clearly

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with the halting pace of most other Saudi government organs. Nayif also supervises the Kingdom's 13 provincial governors. Nayif does not hesitate to use the authority at his command to keep himself in the public eye, even for seemingly minor matters such as personally issuing a directive on how Saudi citizens must report lost or stolen official documents, or attempting to restrict Saudis' access to foreign embassy social functions where alcohol is served.

WHO IS NAYIF, PART 1: PUBLIC PERSONA

¶4. (C) In a May 2009 PBS/NOW documentary on the MOI's terrorist rehabilitation program Robert Lacey (author of the seminal 1981 book, "The Kingdom,") remarked that popular views of the Ministry of Interior have changed dramatically in the 30 years since he first came to the Kingdom. In 1975 the MOI was an object of fear and resentment. Today, Nayif and his officers enjoy widespread support among most Saudis for having restored order and stability following the 2003-2006 terrorist insurgency. The professionalization and competence of today's Ministry of Interior, and initiatives such as its terrorist rehabilitation program, have succeeded in restoring public trust and support for the government, and this provides Nayif with a strong political base.

¶5. (C) Perhaps mindful of his role as guardian of public safety, Nayif's higher public profile and increased rhetoric tends to focus on delphic exhortations, paternalistic platitudes, reminders of Saudi Arabia's (i.e. his) success in defeating terrorism, and flattering praise of King Abdullah. Nayif denies all problems and assures Saudis they live in one of the most secure and stable countries in the world under the guidance of their enlightened and all-knowing rulers: "We live now in security and safety, thanks to Almighty Allah, then to the country's prudent political leadership, and the people standing steadfast behind their leaders." Some of his public utterances are clearly contrary to fact; for example he has insisted for months that Crown Prince Sultan is in good health.

WHO IS NAYIF, PART 2: UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

¶6. (C) Nayif's elevation to Second Deputy Prime Minister does not appear to have changed his basic character. Past reporting has generally described him as elusive, ambiguous, pragmatic, unimaginative, shrewd, and outspoken. He retains a reputation as anti-Western, though willing to do business when shared interests are involved. He is not known for personal religious piety (indeed, he was rumored to be a heavy drinker in his younger days), but his conservatism has enabled him to build support among social and religious conservatives. He appears reserved and even a bit shy, and can initially be a bit stiff and slow to engage in meetings with Western officials. While at first avoiding eye-contact with his interlocutors, he is susceptible to flattery and, once he warms up, occasionally reveals an almost impish sense of humor. Nayif does not show evidence of being well-educated. For example, he rarely quotes from the Quran as the King is apt to do, nor does he make the historical or literary references that Princeton-educated Saud Al-Faisal is known for. Nayif is neither well-spoken nor articulate, and has a tendency to ramble and repeat platitudes in private as well as in public. He does appear to understand and speak at least some English.

¶7. (S/NF) Recent private meetings with Nayif have tended to follow a pattern. Visitors are treated to long dissertations on Saudi Arabia's accomplishments in overcoming domestic terrorism, the importance of U.S./Saudi security cooperation, and Iranian threats and perfidy. Nayif can trace the Iranian connection to any regional security issue. His view of Iran is more sophisticated than that of King Abdullah, and he will talk in detail about his own experiences in Saudi/Iranian relations. (Nayif headed the Saudi opening with Iran that began in 1994.) Nayif's discourse will usually reveal some new details about Saudi thinking but he does not engage in strategic discussion and rarely gives specific answers to questions asked of him.

WHO IS NAYIF, PART 3: CHAMPION OF
SECURITY AND STABILITY FIRST AND LAST

¶8. (C) In a July meeting, Nayif told Charge and Polcouns that his top priority was making the Kingdom the safest country in the region. This was necessary for both stability

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and economic prosperity. With a twinkle in his eye, he continued: "since we know that capital is a coward" (i.e., investment flees from unstable countries). Likewise, he said that relations between nations should be grounded in security cooperation, "which should not be affected by politics."

¶9. (C) Nayif appears to have unified much of his agenda under the slogan of "intellectual security," (in Arabic, "al-amm al-fikri") a concept he promotes tirelessly in public and private. In Nayif's own words, "the origin of intellectual security is the protection of youths from falling prey to whoever wants to exploit them to harm their country, their religion, or the interests of their country - the basis of intellectual security is the safety of the creed, and the strength of the correct thinking in confronting the deviant ideas and those who promote them - our responsibility is to consolidate the correct (ideas) and teach them to our youths, and to correct the deviation by means of firm evidence and proof derived from the Holy Quran and the Sunnah."

¶10. (C) Nayif has not presented it as such, but the idea of "intellectual security," with its emphasis on orthodoxy and control, provides Saudi conservatives an alternative vision to King Abdullah's program of tolerance, national dialogue, and more knowledge-based education. Both focus on preventing the spread of extremist ideology, but Nayif's version offers to do so without opening Saudi society to outside ideas or

"innovation" despised by religious conservatives, or requiring any concessions to the Shia. Conceptualizing intellectual security as Nayif has done also takes what is basically a program of coercive religious and social indoctrination and legitimizes it by equating it with other aspects of national security such as critical infrastructure protection, border security, and measures to counter terrorist finance.

¶11. (C) Nayif appears to guard his concept from encroachment by other political actors. Citing the interest of "higher authorities," the Shura Council's Social Affairs Committee recently quashed a proposal to establish a "Higher Commission for Intellectual Security" to promote "awareness of the dangers of deviant ideology" in schools, mosques, and commercial centers. A Nayif surrogate had criticized the Shura proposal as containing "personal agendas which lack maturity," and emphasized that any such commission would be part of a larger national intellectual security strategy that was already being prepared at Nayif's request.

THE ART OF COMPROMISE IN MANAGING RELIGIOUS FANATICISM

¶12. (C) Nayif's education in affairs of state came under the tutelage of his older full brother, the late King Fahd, whom he succeeded as interior minister when the latter became Crown Prince. A primary lesson imparted was the need to balance Saudi Arabia's competing religious and reformist factions. Following the disastrous take over of the Mecca Grand Mosque in 1979 by religious fanatics critical of Al Saud profligacy, Fahd adopted the title "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques." The lesson was not lost on Nayif. Both a key pillar of support and a source of instability, the country's religious establishment and the reactionaries who periodically ascend to its leadership require deft handling. Their management is among the Interior Minister's most critical functions. The Al Saud have traditionally preferred conciliation and co-option to coercive measures. Occasional violent clashes throughout the nearly three hundred years of Al Saud rule demonstrate that they have not always succeeded.

¶13. (C) Given his paramount concern with maintaining stability, Nayif's instincts tend towards concessions to religious demands, especially on cultural/social issues such as the role of the morals police -- the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (CPVPV). This is sometimes misinterpreted as opposition to reform, but more likely stems from a desire to balance competing social forces, avoid a destabilizing pace of change, and preserve a mechanism useful in maintaining social control and even fighting terror. In a recent speech Nayif said "I hope the day will come when all families thank the (CPVPV) for its role in the guidance of their sons." He criticized the media for exaggerating CPVPV errors, and said "The Commission is a complementary body for the security agencies and vice versa, and there is no problem between the Commission and the state's security agencies." Contacts say Nayif recently

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issued an order allowing the CPVPV, the Saudi morals police, to expand its activities in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia's most liberal city, overruling the Emir of Mecca Prince Khalid bin Faisal's order banning the CPVPV from entering private compounds and restaurants. Nayif is also widely credited with ordering the last-minute cancellation of the internationally-advertised Jeddah Film Festival earlier this year. He acted after the Grand Mufti had thrown down a gauntlet in the form of an official fatwa banning cinemas, issued a month before the festival. (Refs A and B).

DRAWING THE LINE AT SHIISM

¶14. (S/NF) Like many of his compatriots, though not/not King Abdullah, Nayif displays signs of personal prejudice against the Shia, and has taken an increasingly hard line in dealing with Shia unrest throughout the Kingdom. When asked in a recent meeting about the basis for the SAG contention that the Houthi rebels in Yemen were cooperating with Iran, Nayif replied with a shrug, "They are Shia so they work with Iran."

In response to disturbances over access to the Baqi'a Cemetery in Medina, Nayif publicly blamed the Shia for the unrest (in inflammatory remarks published in Saudi newspapers on March 14), insisting that the Shia must respect the doctrine of the "Sunnis and our righteous forefathers." Some Shia activists see Nayif as the source of most sectarian discrimination. For his part, the Second Deputy Prime Minister has made clear he will not tolerate violent protests by Shia malcontents, and seems reluctant to apply the conciliatory tactics that work well with Sunni religious extremists.

IF STABILITY REQUIRES REFORM, SO BE IT

¶15. (C) Nayif appears skeptical of progressive concepts such as democracy, women's rights, or freedom of expression. He recently stated he sees no need for elections in Saudi Arabia or for women to serve in the Shura Council, the Saudi proto-legislature. Democracy, he recently declared, would not produce the most qualified Shura Council members. He has described the role of the media as "expressing remarks in a positive way" in order to change the aberrant ideas that have invaded the minds of our youths," and has said "media is not only the responsibility of the state, but it is the responsibility of all." Equally, he has dismissed calls to allow women to drive as "not a priority." Interestingly, however, some of his security-driven initiatives have improved the status of women. For example, the 2001 decision taken to issue women photo identity cards, necessary because terrorists and some criminals were disguising themselves in women's garb, gave many women the documentation needed to independently establish bank accounts, register at universities, and start businesses. In another instance, the need to reach out to the families of victims of terrorism in Qassim resulted in activating several women's charitable groups in the region. The women, who had previously been hampered by bureaucratic red tape as well as hard-line attitudes from undertaking activities, suddenly found impediments swept away by an MOI eager to prevent radicalization of the families of terrorism victims in that conservative region. (Ref C describes the advances that have resulted.)

A PRAGMATIC U.S. PARTNER?

¶16. (S/NF) A story circulates among long-time Saudi watchers that Nayif's personal views of the U.S. have been negatively "colored" by the discovery of a listening device in his office following the visit of a U.S. delegation. As Nayif's public comments after 9/11 (it was the "Jews"), his ultra-cautious approach to reform, his obstructionism in the Khobar Towers investigation, and his initial refusal to accept that terrorist financing from the Kingdom is a serious problem all demonstrate, Nayif can be difficult, stubborn, and unreasonable. These traits do not reflect "anti-American" attitudes so much as prickliness to perceived outside pressure and interference in the Kingdom's affairs.

¶17. (C) In this regard, Nayif has regularly received U.S. officials, especially in recent months; invited the U.S. to partner with the Kingdom in a major new program for the protection of critical infrastructure; highly praised the President's Cairo speech; welcomed the President's attention to solving the Middle East conflict as "very important;" and publicly described the U.S. as essential to achieving

stability, both regionally and globally. In sum, Nayif's interactions with the U.S. as Interior Minister are probably a good predictor of his inclinations, were he to become Crown Prince. That is, he will likely be pragmatic, continue security and other forms of cooperation, but possibly prove more resistant than the current leadership on human rights issues that challenge his world view and risk increasing social tensions.

HEALTH AND FAMILY ISSUES HAVEN'T SLOWED HIM

¶18. (C) Nayif has appeared energetic and active since his taking on his new office, making frequent appearances at government functions and other public events, despite continued reports and rumors that he suffers from leukemia and possibly other health problems. He continues to favor late evening meetings, and although he dozed off while his lengthy remarks were translated during a recent meeting with Charge, he never lost the thread of the conversation.

¶19. (C) Nayif's public image benefits from the accomplishments and good reputation of his son, Assistant Minister of the Interior Mohammed bin Nayif (MbN), who has had day-to-day oversight of Saudi counter terrorism efforts. MbN is more rounded, more intellectual, more educated (in the U.S.), and would probably make a better king than his father. On the other hand, European media recently reported that one of Nayif's wives, Maha bint Mohammed bin Ahmed Al-Sudairi was sued in Paris for USD 24.5 million in unpaid shopping bills, not the first time she has created such embarrassment for her husband. Not surprisingly, Saudi media said nothing about the matter.

SO WILL NAYIF BECOME KING?

¶20. (C) MAYBE YES?: With the eclipse of Crown Prince Sultan, Nayif is seen by many as the second-most powerful individual in Saudi Arabia. He can also claim to be next in seniority among the princes who have enough influence and competence to be king, and the force of precedent within the royal family may ensure his place as next in line for the throne. In any succession debate Nayif is likely to have the support of religious conservatives, his security forces, and the CPVPV, and the backing of his Sudairi brothers who form the most powerful faction within the royal family. He commands public support as the man who defeated terrorism in Saudi Arabia, and his authority over the MOI gives him vast power to control public events and behavior.

¶21. (C) MAYBE NOT?: King Abdullah will want to ensure that the next crown prince is someone who will carry on his legacy of political and social reforms, and there are those who believe that Nayif cannot be counted upon to do so. Abdullah has not said that Nayif's appointment as Second Deputy Prime Minister confirmed him as next in the line of succession, although the previous two incumbents in the position - Abdullah himself and Sultan - both moved up to become Crown Prince upon the death of the King. Another question mark is the role of the new, untested, 34-member Allegiance Council, which was created by Abdullah ostensibly to ensure a smooth succession but which many have viewed as a veiled attempt to block automatic succession by Nayif. In negotiations on a new crown prince, Nayif would likely face opposition from more liberal members of the royal family, such as the Al Faisal or Prince Talal, or a coalition of non-Sudairis. Other senior princes such as Minister of Municipal and Rural Affairs Prince Mit'eb or Riyadh Governor Salman could stake claims to the throne. One Saudi blog claims Mi'teb does not attend Council of Ministers meetings when Nayif is in the chair, and liberal public opinion could oppose Nayif despite his counterterrorism achievements.

¶22. (C) The bottom line is that the need for a brokered agreement on the next Crown Prince probably will require Nayif to move somewhat more to the center in order to broaden

his support among the senior princes who make up the Allegiance Council. Early indications of this dynamic may be comments we have heard from two senior princes that since assuming his responsibilities as Second Deputy Prime Minister, Nayif has adopted a broader, more liberal approach. In responding to the August 27 assassination attempt against his son, Prince Mohammed, Nayif also noticeably associated himself with reform efforts, vowing that the "security efforts and reform strategy the country is following will not change."

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123. (C) AND THE ANSWER IS A DEFINITE MAYBE?: Nayif is certainly the most powerful candidate in the running for next Crown Prince. The hidebound Saudi royal family's adherence to tradition as the only sure way to avoid instability is probably Nayif's strongest advantage in his bid for the job. However, Nayif's reported health problems could prevent his appointment. In a March 2009 on-line poll taken by the conservative Al-Saha website, 38 percent of respondents said Nayif should be the next Saudi king. No other prince received more than 15 percent, including Crown Prince Sultan. However, two-thirds of the respondents opposed the idea of naming a "Crown Prince-in-waiting." The Al-Saha poll is not authoritative, but the results give some indication of Nayif's public support. The results also suggest that King Abdullah does not face significant public pressure to clarify Nayif's status one way or the other. The questions are likely to persist until circumstances (i.e., the death of either the King or Crown Prince Sultan) dictate that the choice must be made.
SMITH